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CAVALRY RECONNAISSANCE

NUMBER THREE

OPERATIONS OF
THE 91st CAVALRY RECONNAISSANCE SQUADRON,
MECHANIZED, FROM EL ABIOD TO MATEUR
(NORTHERN TUNISIA).



FACTUAL NARRATIVE

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FOREWORD

Reconnaissance is a traditional Cavalry role.

Mechanized Cavalry's mission is to provide higher commanders with accurate, complete, and timely information. A Cavalry reconnaissance unit, moving out ahead to obtain information, normally makes the initial contact with the enemy and maintains it.

This pamphlet is Number Three in a series of first-hand accounts of the work Cavalry units have done and are doing on the various battle fronts of World War II. It deals specifically with the operations of the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized, during the campaign in northern Tunisia from 19 April to 3 May 1943.

Maintaining contact with the enemy in northern Tunisia over a twenty-three day period during which the unit was constantly subjected to machine gun and artillery fire, personnel of the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized, demonstrated the soundness and effectiveness of training which it had undergone. In its swing through Tunisia, the 91st came up against crack German outfits and succeeded in accomplishing its numerous missions. Its performance clearly indicated that training in this country is geared to battle needs.

Number Four in this series will cover the operations of the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized, from Mateur to Bizerte (end of campaign 9 May 1943).

**Operations of the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance
Squadron, Mechanized, from El Abiod to Mateur
(Northern Tunisia)**

On 1 April 1943, the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron¹ moved out from the French Garrison east of Casablanca by rail and roads, on which it had 1A priority, to Tebessa, by way of Fez, Tlemsen, Oran, Algiers, and Constantine. By making two night marches² and passing more than a thousand vehicles at Tlemsen and Bel-Abbis, it completed a march of 1083 miles in 5½ days. The Squadron Commander³ reported to the Corps Commander ——— Army Corps, then at Gafsa. The 91st was ordered to bivouac near Tebessa.

1. The squadron was composed of headquarters and headquarters troop, 3 reconnaissance troops, and 1 support troop (light tanks). The headquarters troop comprised 5 platoons as follows: headquarters, communications, pioneer and demolition, antitank, and maintenance and supply. Each reconnaissance troop had a headquarters and 3 reconnaissance platoons; the support troop, a headquarters, and 3 light tank platoons (5 tanks each). The assault-gun troop was not then an organic part of the Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized).

2. FM 100-5, par 370: "*Night marches* often are required to obtain concealment from air and ground observation and security from air attack. They may be made for the purpose of avoiding excessive heat."

3. Lieutenant Colonel Harry W. Candler, Cavalry. Colonel Candler, now a member of Staff and Faculty, The Cavalry School, furnished the information on which this narrative is based.

Four days later the unit moved to an assembly position at Roumes Souk. On 17 April it moved again, this time to an assembly position south of Djebel Tabouna, about 10 miles east of Djebel El Abiod. Accompanied by a liaison officer and detail, the Sq CO lost no time getting to Corps Headquarters, then at Beja, to learn what his unit's first combat mission would be.

Corps G-2 and G-3 went over with the Sq CO what then was known of the enemy situation and discussed tentative plans (see Sketch 1). At 2200 the Commanding General gave the 91st its mission orally as follows (in substance):

*"The 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron is attached to the — Infantry Division. Tell General — you will fill the gap between his division and the — Infantry Division on the south. Relieve the elements of the British — 'Recce' in the area. Push reconnaissance toward Mateur. It is not known at this time whether we will turn toward the north or to the south from that important point."*⁴

Next morning, accompanied by a liaison officer, a scout car with radio and two motorcycle messengers, the Sq CO went to the CP of the—— Infantry Division.⁵ The Commanding General directed the 91st⁶

4. Difficulty was experienced in getting maps of the area. The reconnaissance unit requested 40 copies each of available maps and aerial photographs. They were on order. Shipment was expected that night. It was days before the maps were secured.

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- (1) *to relieve elements of the ——— Reconnaissance Troop in the area between Djebel Tabouna on the south and the main Djebel Abiod—Mateur road on the north,*
- (2) *to relieve Company G, ——— Infantry, which was holding the observation point, Djebel Tabouna (564) and the high ground (506, 415, and 429),*
- (3) *to relieve elements of the British——“Recce” at Farm J in the area,*
- (4) *to maintain liaison with the——Infantry on the north and with the——Infantry on the south,⁷*
- (5) *to push vigorous reconnaissance east on Mateur in the zone assigned.⁸*

5. Significantly, the CP was on the second floor of a large white house setting back about 2 miles off the main road. The only entrance to it was by means of a ladder from the ground to the second floor window. This expedient facilitated checking the identity of individuals coming and going.

6. FM 100-5, par 46: “Cavalry may be attached to, or may be an organic part of, an infantry division; as such it is designated *division cavalry*. Its primary mission is continuous ground reconnaissance. Security and screening are secondary missions. It may be used for liaison during movement and combat.”

7. FM 100-5, par 224: “While a commander who is in need of information from other headquarters is responsible for requesting it, neighboring units should habitually exchange pertinent information regardless of whether such a request has been made.”

8. FM 100-5, par 208: “———Orders for reconnaissance or observation should state definitely the information desired, where it is to be sought, and the destination and time of reports.”

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The situation of the enemy, his strength and disposition, as it was then known, is shown on the sketch (see Sketch 1).⁹ The enemy's attitude, although defensive, was thought to be determined. His morale, particularly in the elite organizations, was high at this time.

Returning to his Squadron CP on the afternoon of 18 April, the Sq CO issued the following orders:

“Commencing daylight, 19 April, the squadron will push vigorous reconnaissance to the east in assigned zone; A Troop, with platoon of tanks on the right, will maintain liaison with the ——— Infantry; C Troop on the left will maintain liaison with the ——— Infantry; boundary between troops¹⁰ generally along the east—west ridge through the squadron zone; B Troop will establish observation posts on the high ground Dj Tabouna (564), patrol road from Mine Dj Tabouna north to Dj Abiod

9. The maps (1/50,000) of the Tabouna area, except for indications of improved roads and prominent terrain features, were inadequate. Little difficult terrain and many unimproved roads and trails were indicated. What appeared to be small hills and ridges frequently were steep, sometimes precipitous hill masses. Unimproved roads and trails shown were, in most cases, nonexistent or of the “sheep” variety.

10. FM 100-5, par 212: “Orders for the development of a command frequently assign zones of reconnaissance to subordinate units. Each unit is habitually responsible for reconnaissance within its zone of advance or action.———.”

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—Mateur road; P&D Platoon, Headquarters Troop, will repair road to the east¹¹; remainder of squadron and command post, present location.”

At daylight, 19 April, accompanied by Captain Elgin E. Sanders, Hq Tr CO, the Sq CO went dismounted along the draw south of Dj Tabouna to the OP on Hill 506.¹² It was a steep climb from the draw up to Hill 506. Apparently no vehicle, except a ¼-ton, would be able to make it. That was an erroneous estimate, however. Looking back after they had reached the OP, the officers saw 2 vehicles (a ¼-ton and a ¾-ton) already half way up and going strong. Lieutenant Hudson, in charge of the vehicles, said the whole troop later was coming that way. (Troop C, commanded by Captain Ted Douthitt, made the climb but it took all day.)

On the way back to the CP, the Sq CO met a captain and a lieutenant from the Engineers, who declared, “For two weeks we have been trying to find a way up this draw.”

11. Considerable pioneer work was needed. A detail from the ——— Infantry Division had worked for some time on the trail from Dj Abiod east for about 10 miles, but it was still necessary to pack on horse for the last 2 miles the supplies needed by the company on Dj Tabouna. The Division was using a considerable number of pack animals at this time and asking for 400 more.

12. FM 100-5, par 216: “Terrain features that afford observation of the hostile dispositions constitute special objectives of reconnaissance. Active and aggressive action of patrols in seizing such terrain features is indicated.”

FM 100-5, par 221: “————The commander usually makes a personal reconnaissance for information of the terrain.”

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Troop A, commanded by Captain Herc Ficklen, moved by way of the Dj Abiod—Beja road and then to the east through the northern part of the—— Infantry Division's sector and relieved the British —— “Recce”.¹³ With troop CP at Farm J, Captain Ficklen established one platoon on the high ridge to the east, and sent one platoon to the east along the graveled road. The latter platoon, commanded by Lieutenant E. Stuart Wells, made first contact with the Germans in the vicinity of the Mine du Dj Semene.

The tank platoon (Tr E), let by Lieutenant Dan E. Coffee, was sent on reconnaissance to determine the strength of the German position. Stopped by impassable terrain (a wadi with vertical banks) about 1,400 yards from the mine, Lieutenant Coffee ordered his turrett 37-mm's to fire on the buildings.¹⁴ The fire flushed a considerable number of Germans who immediately went into prepared positions. Shortly thereafter, the reconnaissance platoon came under fire of machine guns and mortars,¹⁵ the latter throwing white phosphorous. The tanks

13. The information of the enemy in the area obtained from the commander of the British reconnaissance unit confirmed the information received earlier from the division headquarters. In addition, CO received from the British very valuable information concerning the terrain, the roads on the ground not shown on the map, and roads and trails on the map which did not exist on the ground.

14. TC 107, par 7b: “————Terrain and the situation may require the use of dismounted patrols or reconnaissance by fire to supplement observation————.”

15. Later on light artillery fire was received from this position.

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were withdrawn without casualties to a position from which they could keep the enemy under observation.¹⁶

About mid-afternoon, 1st Lieutenant Norvell N. Walker, mounted in a jeep, started back along the trail (see Sketch 2) from Farm J to the Squadron CP with a message. He had gone but a few hundred yards when his $\frac{1}{4}$ -ton truck struck a mine.¹⁷ Thrown out of the vehicle by the explosion, both the driver and the officer were severely injured. Private Cahout suffered fractures of both legs. One of Lieutenant Walker's legs was broken in three places.

First Lieutenant John M. Davis, commanding B Troop, sent two platoons, dismounted, to take over the OP's on Hills 564, 415, and 506, and one platoon (Lieutenant Franklin's) to patrol mounted the Dj Tabouna and main Dj Abiod—Mateur roads.¹⁸

Troops A, B, and C continued their reconnaissance mission to the east on 20 April. The remainder of the squadron moved from the vicinity of Djebel

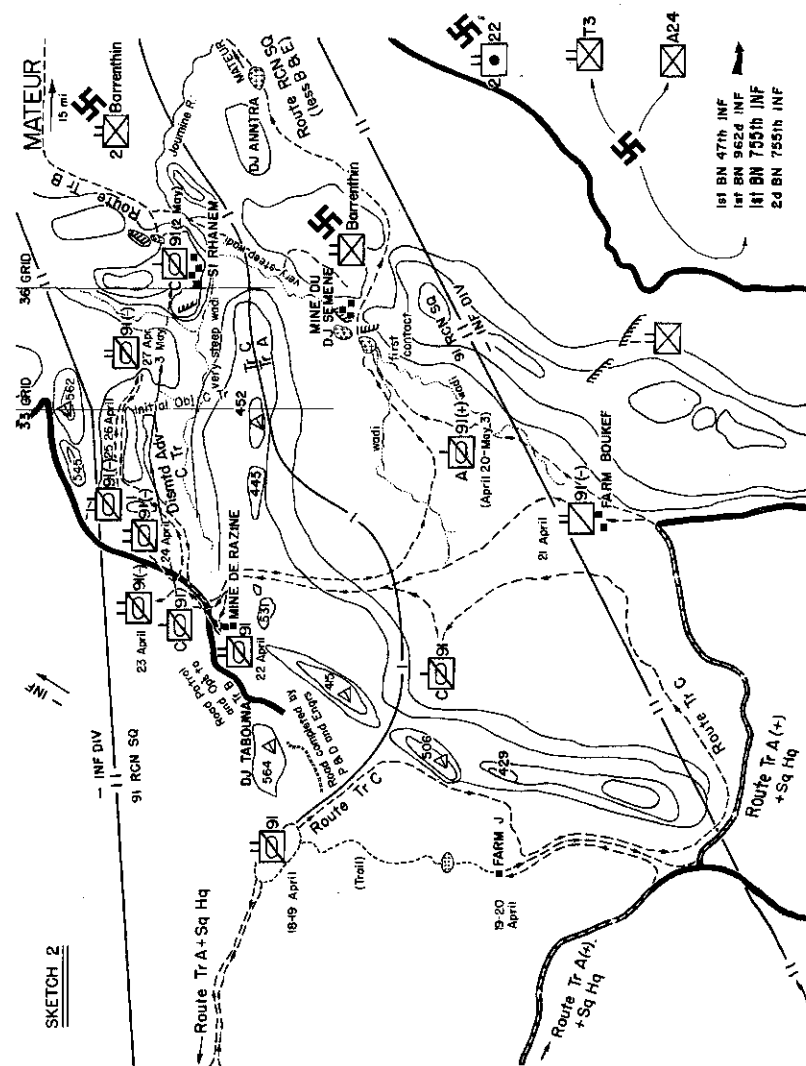
16. FM 100-5, par 211: "Ground reconnaissance elements gain and maintain contact with the enemy-----."

17. The floor of the $\frac{1}{4}$ -ton truck was sandbagged. Lieutenant Walker stated that he believed this expedient saved his life.

18. The P & D platoon, working with the engineers from the — Infantry Division, improvised a road around Dj Tabouna to tie onto the Mine Dj Tabouna road. This obviated the need for pack animals.

FM 100-5, par 216: "Terrain features that afford observation of the hostile dispositions constitute especial objectives of reconnaissance. Active and aggressive action of patrols in seizing such terrain features is indicated."

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Tabouna to Farm J. Contact was maintained with the enemy in the vicinity of Mine Du Semene.¹⁹

On 21 April, an officer patrol from Troop A (mounted in four 1/4-ton trucks) was sent to reconnoiter around the enemy on high ground in the vicinity of Mine Du Semene.²⁰ The patrol worked its way across the wadi but was unable to advance further mounted due to the steepness of the slope. During the dismounted advance, the patrol suddenly found itself surrounded by Germans. Two men and 2 vehicles were captured. The patrols returned late that same evening.

Lieutenant Wells, although he had had little rest for several days, organized a dismounted patrol to go out that same night to "recapture" the officer and men. This doughty patrol was unable to get into the German position, but it brought back much valuable information and a third man thought to have been captured.

The squadron, less detachments, moved into a draw north of Farm Boukef (see Sketch 2). Patrols reported a large German infantry force in the

19. FM 100-5, par 214: "-----contact-----once gained must never be lost-----."

20. FM 100-5, par 211: "Ground reconnaissance elements gain and maintain contact with the enemy, and, by working through gaps and around the flanks and rear, endeavor to ascertain the strength, movements, composition, and dispositions of the enemy's main force, and the approach of enemy reinforcements."

TC 107, par 7a: "Cavalry reconnaissance units employ infiltration tactics rather than combat to gain information. They seek unopposed routes of advance to gain observation points."

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C Troop zone. A considerable number of mines, laid by German patrols during the night, were removed along the Djebel Tabouna—Djebel Abiod—Mateur road.²¹ Most of the roads in this area, particularly where they crossed ridges, were kept under long and mid-range artillery fire during hours of daylight.

The — Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop provided liaison between the 91st's Troop A and the — Infantry Regiment on the right. A patrol from Troop B occupied high ground (Hills 545 and 562) to provide liaison with the — Infantry Regiment which was to move up on the squadron's left.

Troops A and B continued on their missions on 22 April. It was raining steadily.

Troop C moved to the north over the ridge Djebel Tabouna (531—445—452).

The squadron, less the reconnaissance troops, moved to the vicinity of the Mine de Razine.

Reporting to the Commanding General, — Infantry Division, the Sq CO received a copy of the Corps order covering an attack to be made commencing daylight, 23 April. The — Infantry Division was to make its main effort on its right (south) flank; the — Infantry Division, in conjunction with the French Corps, was to make its main effort on the north; the 91st Cavalry Recon-

21. FM 5-30, par 233: "Determined troops are not stopped by a mine field-----The danger of crossing mine fields is not great for properly trained troops. Troops must be trained, or they will not be able to handle antipersonnel and activated mines, will be delayed, and will suffer unnecessary losses."

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naissance Squadron was directed to push aggressive reconnaissance to the east within its assigned zone.²²

Back at his CP, the Sq CO assembled his staff and unit commanders, explained the situation, and issued following order:

Troop A push vigorous mounted reconnaissance to the east; Troop B establish observation posts on Hills 545, 562, and 445, and continue previous mission; Troop C leave vehicles (with drivers only) in the vicinity of bridge and attack dismounted in its zone, seizing and holding the forward end of the high ridge generally along the 33 grid²³; the squadron, less detachments, to remain in the vicinity of Mine de Razine.

At 0530, 23 April, while the artillery supporting — Infantry (north) and — Infantry (south) was pounding away, elements of the 91st moved out. Troop A (south) was unable to push through the

22. TC 107, par 12 e: "-----The squadron can reconnoiter a zone 25 miles wide-----."

TC 107, par 12f: "The squadron has sufficient power to engage in offensive or defensive action in the performance of reconnaissance missions-----."

23. FM 100-5, par 219: "When hostile resistance is encountered which cannot be brushed aside or enveloped, a reconnaissance in force constitutes the best means of clearing up an uncertain situation. Troops engaged in a reconnaissance in force usually make a local attack with a limited objective-----"

All reconnaissance elements must be trained in the proper execution, coordination, and control of dismounted attack.—Author.

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German position on the high ground. Troop C (north), advancing dismounted, did not come under fire until well along the ridges later that day.

The Sq CO was called to Division CP about noon. G-2 told him that from all indications the Germans were about to launch a counterattack. The 91st was ordered to hold the line to which it had advanced at all costs.²⁴

The Sq CO took no chances. He went to each Tr's CP and actually drew on the map the line to be held. The line ran generally along the 33 grid.

From 23 April to 2 May,²⁵ inclusive, Cavalry reconnaissance patrols, trying to find a way through the enemy line on the high ground to the front, were active night and day.²⁶

On the night of 24-25 April, Troop B was relieved

24. TC 107, par 12f: "The squadron has sufficient power to engage in offensive or defensive action in the performance of reconnaissance missions-----."

25. Squadron CP and support were moved to a new location daily and normally to an alternate location after darkness. It had been the experience of our troops in the southern Tunisian operations that Germans were spotting such installations during the day and returning to bomb or shell them during the late hours of daylight or early hours of morning. On the night of 23-24 April, Sq CP was moved after darkness to a new location about 400 yards to the north of Mine de Razine. Next morning the previous location was shelled.

26. FM 100-5, par 214: "----- The search for information must be unremitting-----."

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from OP duty and ordered to advance in the zone between Troop C and the — Infantry Regiment to the north. All movement was to be by dismounted patrol under supporting fire of the artillery and the 91st's own mortars and 37-mm guns.²⁷ The Sq CO requested and obtained an artillery observer for the B and C Troop zones.

Troops B and C (on the north) advanced in their respective zones to a north—south line generally along the 36 grid. Losses were 5 men killed and 2 officers and 25 men wounded.

The Support Troop, under Captain James S. Greene, Jr., was detached from the squadron 23 April, and sent to the north to assist the advance of the French Corps. (It rejoined the squadron 6 May.)

Major John B. Donnell, Sq S-2-3,²⁸ was with the leading platoon of Troop C when, advancing east along the draw to envelop the enemy strong point on the high ground (Si Rhanem), it came upon and surprised a group of Germans in a draw. It is be-

27. TC 107, par 7b: "-----Terrain and the situation may require the use of dismounted patrols-----Armored cars, assault guns, mortars, and automatic weapons may support the movement of 1/4-ton trucks and dismounted men-----."

28. Members of staffs should not spend all their time around their maps, but should go forward from time to time to see that orders and intentions of unit and higher commanders are being carried out. In this particular emergency, Major Donnell actually manned the light machine gun. He was wounded seriously.

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lieved that all members of the German patrol were either killed or wounded. Darkness made an exact count of the casualties impracticable.

During the night 2-3 May, patrols discovered that Jerry had withdrawn from his position on the high ground in the 91st's zone. However, there still remained the problem of reconnoitering for passages through this high ground to the front.

Late in the day on 3 May, Troop B moved forward mounted a short distance past the position formerly occupied by the German infantry. Difficulty of the terrain dictated dismounted reconnaissance. Patrols were sent out that night.²⁹ The remainder of Troop B moved to an assembly area.

Troop A found a pass just south of the Mine du Semene, but reported that it was doubtful whether vehicles larger than a 1/4-ton could get through.³⁰

29. FM 2-20, par 32a: "-----Night reconnaissance is limited ordinarily to dismounted patrolling-----."

FM 2-20, par 32b: "Night reconnaissance is planned carefully after detailed map study. Reconnaissance of routes is made in daylight where practicable. Each unit leader prepares a sketch showing the route to be followed, the road net of the area, landmarks which can be recognized at night, compass bearings for major changes of directions and distances from the initial point to permanent landmarks along the route."

30. The Ex O, upon return to Sq CP, relayed this information to higher headquarters. Throughout this operation, radio contact was maintained continuously with CP's of the — Infantry Division, — Infantry Division (right), and the — Infantry Regiment (left).

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Lieutenant Gus Gabel's platoon advanced dismounted through the position formerly occupied by Troop C.

Troop C, having been dismounted and in constant contact with the enemy throughout the period, was withdrawn to squadron support. The troop was sorely in need of time for reorganization and maintenance.³¹ Its performance had been magnificent. The entire troop, driven back from its position by German counterattack late one evening, moved forward at daylight the next day and retook not only its position, but successfully attacked and occupied the one previously held by the Germans.³²

At daylight, 3 May, the Sq CO drove his jeep down a sheep trail which would have been difficult to negotiate on foot. Shortly thereafter, Troop B, following down the same trail, was directed to move east and work its way forward across either of the two saddles of the ridge which could be seen

31. Cavalry Reconnaissance, Number One, Part II, Note 12: "It is granted that the men are tired and weary, but it is criminal to let them loaf during his period in reserve. By that it is not meant that they should not be allowed to rest-----. One of the hardest jobs that a troop commander has during this period is to keep from letting up-----."

32. FM 100-5, par 663: "-----Such local counterattacks must be launched during the period of temporary confusion and disorganization which occurs when the attacking troops have entered the position and have not had time to reorganize and establish themselves-----."

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in the distance. The Troop Commander took leave of his superior with a jovial "Well, see you in Mateur (about 16 miles distant) this evening."

Troop A was to follow its leading platoon through the pass and reconnoiter along the valley of River Joumine. Squadron headquarters and support were to move on the axis of Troop A.³³

Going forward to the leading platoon (Tr A), the Sq CO found it halted in front of a mine field. The Germans had withdrawn in such haste that they had left in place the triangular yellow flags employed for warning their own vehicles. The platoon, after removing sufficient mines for passage through the field, moved rapidly on towards Mateur.³⁴

When the Sq CO arrived in Mateur, he found that Troop B and the platoon from Troop A had been there about 2 hours.

33. The big wadi, separating Troop A and Troop B, necessitated a trip of 12 miles over rough terrain to get from one command post to the other. Actually those CP's were only about 4 miles apart. Patrols already had reconnoitered what appeared to be a valley in front of the troops and had reported it impassable to vehicles.

34. FM 5-30, par 212a: "-----The detection of these mines is the responsibility of all arms. Their neutralization and removal is the responsibility of engineers or troops of other branches who have been specially trained for this work."

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The platoon of Troop A, directed to move on up the road to the north of Mateur and relieve a detachment of the 81st Reconnaissance Battalion, reached the Sedjenane River and found the bridge at that point destroyed, but succeeded in establishing contact with the French Corps north of the river.

The remainder of Troop A, when it arrived, moved on north to a position at Farm Dehren.

The squadron (less Troops A and E) went into an assembly position one mile west of Mateur. Patrols from Troop B were sent immediately to reconnoiter the hillmass Djebel Ichkeul. That same evening Combat Commands A and B, — Armored Division, moved into an assembly area a short distance to the south of the squadron.

The 81st Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, a Cavalry-trained organization, preceding the — Armored Division up the Beja—Mateur road, already had sent its leading elements into Mateur. They had the city of Mateur and all roads leading thereto outposted when the 91st arrived.

That evening the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron received an order detaching it from the — Infantry Division and attaching it to the — Armored Division.

This narrative will be continued in Cavalry Reconnaissance Number Four.